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L E T T E R

OF

W. C. SMEDES, ESQ.,

VICKSBURG, MISS.,

IN VINDICATION

OF THE

SOUTHERN CONFEDERACY.

TAKEN FROM THE RICHMOND ENQUIRER, JULY 18, 1861.

JACKSON:
MISSISSIPPIAN BOOK AND JOB OFFICE.

1861.

From the Richmond Enquirer, of July 18th, 1861.

The following letter, written by a distinguished gentleman of Mississippi, formerly opposed to Secession, in answer to a friend in New York City, has been handed to us for publication. We would commend it to the misguided people of our own State and of Tennessee, who are still withholding their allegiance from their respective State Governments :

LETTER.

VICKSBURG, MISS., MAY 25, 1861.

H. H. E., ESQ., NEW YORK CITY :

My Dear Sir:—I have received and read your obviously kindly intended letter of May 15th, inst., and my surprise was great, and upon re-reading it and thinking about it, becomes greater and greater, that the simple and most natural idea did not occur to you, by which are the horrors that you have so vividly painted, all the blood shed, crime, civil war, public demoralization, devastation and private ruin, in store for the whole land, would be at once and entirely avoided, and peace and good will reign in their stead, and prosperity and general happiness once more spread their sunshine over the land. That idea is the recognition of a fixed fact, the INDEPENDENCE OF THE CONFEDERATE STATES. That recognized and publicly acknowledged, and all the clouds of war which darken the heavens and begin to hurl their bolts upon the earth will be dispersed. Without that, the cloud, will never be rolled back ; and though the darkness be turned into blood and every conceivable element of horror be added, nothing can stay the violence or duration of the storm but that.

These are figures. Let me drop them, and assure you, in plain and solemn prose, that the separation between the North and the South, between the slave and free States, is final and irrevocable ; and *ought to be so*. And every intelligent man, North and South, ought to strive in a common and earnest effort to make it so. *That* is a compromise such as you refer to, “a true compromise” which will settle this *questio vexata* forever, and will leave to both of us and both sections and all our posterity, “a nation and a government under which we can leave our children in safety.” No other possible compromise can ever be made. It is idle to speak or think of any other. The gulf of division is impassable and eternal ; and whatever I and others who once revered the Union of our fathers, and dreaded its downfall as the greatest of national calamities, may have thought in times past, I do not believe there is one man in my whole acquaintance in the Confederate States, who would consent to its re-establishment on any terms ; or who would not resist it more determinedly and bitterly than he did its dismemberment.

It is worse than useless to review the past. You wholly mistake, when you think we are deceived or deluded by our leaders. We are men of fair intelligence, and we understand this question in all its parts and bearings, as fully, I believe, as you, or any of the leaders either North or South. To put it plainly to you, and show what I mean ; you and I, as fair representatives of the moderate and conserv-

ative men of the two sections, ought not live under a common Government, or to be subject to the same laws. You, a Christian man, a just man, a fair minded man, a humane man, and I, hoping and praying that I may possess like characteristics, are not fitted to be under a common Government, with the institution of slavery in the part in which I live, without it in the part in which you live. You agree with Mr. Lincoln that slavery is wrong; and, to use your own language, "You cannot favor or allow the extension of it." I think it right, has the Divine sanction, is approved by reason, and founded in necessity. You think all the power of the national Government must be used to circumscribe it, and confine it to its present limits. I think it should be free as the air, to go where necessity, or inclination, or duty prompts. These views and principles are totally antagonistic. They are the antipodes of each other. They lead inevitably to different policies, to opposite measures, to clashing interests, to open hostility. Your views and opinions are those of the dominant majority of one section of the country; mine, of the whole body of the other. It is too plain for dispute, that the differences are irreconcilable, and must inevitably, sooner or later, have resulted in division. That division has come, and it is immaterial whether it has come by secession or by revolution; whether the rupture has been according to the forms of a supposed legal right; and with all the legitimate ordinances of popular conventions executing the popular will, or by open revolution. It has come. The Union is dissolved. We are no longer one nation, and never will, or can be united again under a common government. We will have no more irrepressible conflicts in the nation; no more questions of half slave and half free; no more agonizing disputes about the rights of the South and slaveholders in the territories and districts of the government. We are two people; two nations; two Governments. You, with your institutions, habits, opinions; we with ours. You answerable alone for your own, we for ours. You no longer troubled by the moral responsibilities, which according to the oft-uttered complaint, your connection with us imposed. We, freed from the intolerable interference with our rights of property that grew out of your sensitive consciences—you, permitted to assert your righteousness to its fullest scope, in having washed your hands of the deadly sin of abetting the holding your fellow man in bondage; we, allowed to ask the Divine mercy upon us miserable sinners, and implore Divine help to enable us henceforth faithfully to do our duties by those bond servants, born in our houses, or purchased with our money, whose welfare, and happiness, and progress, your steady intermeddling, for a quarter of a century, has greatly checked and thrown back. In a word, you and your section without slavery; we and ours with it.

This, I say, is what every intelligent man, both North and South, ought to rejoice to see exist, and ought to strive to make permanent. It is, in every aspect of the question, far better than it was before. We cannot live in peace together. We have an insuperable element of discord; we cannot yield it up. You will not cease your attacks upon it, either directly or indirectly, either openly or insidiously, under one pretext or another. That element of discord has divided us; it must have divided us. The institution of slavery is of such a nature that its lawfulness cannot be questioned by outsiders, without danger of infinite and inexpressible mischief. Its prosperity must depend, in the very nature of things, upon the unlimited and most unrestrained con-

fidence and love between master and slave. An outside interference, teaching the slave, however remotely, that he does not owe an allegiance demanded of him, while it is cruel to the slave, is dangerous to the master, and excites his alarm and arouses his passions. It destroys the foundation on which the institution rests, and is intolerable. That the master endured, it as long as he did, is a proof of his loyalty to the government and of his confidence in the supposed intelligence and justice of those who were to administer that government, and in the humanity which he hoped would ultimately stay the hand of those who, often carelessly and indifferently, but too often wickedly, threatened the peace and permanence of his household.

This line of argument need be pursued no further. Anti-slavery has reaped its legitimate and inevitable fruits, in the dissolution of the Union. The Confederate States are now, and I have no earthly doubt will continue to be a separate and independent government; homogeneous, without any element of discord, under a written Constitution, having a republican form, securing popular rights and a well regulated liberty, by all the sanctions which law justly and fairly administered can furnish. Why should not their late allies and brethren recognize the fact of the independence and separate existence of this new government, comprising one half a million of square miles of territory, inhabited by at least ten millions of human beings? It is, beyond all cavil, true that the Union is divided; the South has set up a separate government and is determined to sustain it by force of arms, and has now over one hundred thousand well drilled and officered troops in the field, thoroughly equipped, to defend to the last the position she has taken. Why should the Northern States deny us this right to govern ourselves and to separate from them? Why should they seek to subjugate us and to drive us back into a Union from which our whole land is now jubilant that we have escaped? I have carefully looked and looked again through your letter to see any reasonable or even plausible pretext or suggestion offered for it. The only idea like a justification is, that you must now "struggle to the death, for a nation and a government under which you can leave your children in safety?" Let us examine this. It will not bear the test of scrutiny for a moment. It will not justify the loss of a single life, the ruin of a single man of business; much less the hecatombs of human beings now about to be offered up, upon such a pitiable conceit and delusion, and the wide spread commercial ruin that has already swept like a besom of destruction through the country.

What is this plea upon which a fratricidal war of desolation is to be prosecuted; begun with dreadful expressions of ferocity, and likely to be carried on in a no less ferocious spirit? It is that *your* children may have a nation and a government in which their safety will be secured. And let me ask you how that is to be effected; by giving up *our* land, to be wasted with fire and sword, and *our* wives and children made the victims, as threatened, of both civil and servile war? How will the acknowledgment of the independence of the Confederate States affect the nation and the government under which you and your children will live? That government will outwardly remain as it is now, except that it will be composed of fewer States. It will be as it was before our separation, and as you would have it after we are forced back into union with you. You will transmit the same form of govern-

ment to your children and the same nation that you now have, as well without as with the Confederate States. We are essential neither to your nationality nor to your form of government. Both are complete without us. What, then, do you mean by "struggling to the death for a nation and a government under which you can leave your children in safety?" We do not propose to alter the form or substance of *your* government. We have simply withdrawn from its control, and are independent of it. The old thirteen States had less population and covered less territory than the nineteen free States will possess; and *their* founders transmitted a safe government to their descendants. Why is an union with the slave States necessary to enable you to transmit a safe government to your children? Is slavery a vital element to your prosperity as it is to ours; without which you cannot leave a stable government behind you? If not, what is it, then, you mean? Is it, that by recognizing the independence of the Confederate States you thereby recognize the doctrine of secession, and admit its legality; and thus sanction a principle which may some day prove your own ruin? Is that what you mean? And you would struggle to the death, and involve the whole land in the horrors of civil war, before you would let us begin our national career by the assertion of a political principle, that, however heterodox it may now seem, may some day be successfully maintained in the Northern States, and result in a still further breaking up of your federal alliance? Your object in this war, then, is to put down the idea of State rights, State sovereignty, and State independence, and to maintain in the federal authority, and the absolute sovereignty of the Federal government. It is a war against political ideas, and to crush out a political heresy, that has had its advocates ever since the separation of the colonies from Great Britain. It is a war against freedom of opinion, the equality and rights of the States, the liberties and right of self-government of the people. And the result of such a war, even if crowned with the completest success, you think will leave a safe and stable government to your children. And in such a hope and for such an end you propose to cry "Havoc, and let slip the dogs of war," and drench the land in blood, and carnage. If it be not that, what else can you possibly mean by struggling for a government under which your children can live in safety? Is it a military despotism that you wish to establish? If so, I confess you are taking the right and the sure means to accomplish it. But if you want a constitutional government, you are madly and blindly building up a fatal barrier against it. It is alone by the consent and the will of the people that a constitutional government can be established and upheld. To force a government upon an unwilling people is to subject them to a despotism.

I admit that at one time I looked with great apprehension to the effect upon popular government of the dissolution of the Union. I feared it would demonstrate its weakness, and prove the failure of free principles. On the contrary, it has afforded incontestible evidence of the capacity of the people for self-government, and that constitutional liberty has an absolute safeguard in their intelligence and freedom.—The disintegration of the late union and the establishment of our present confederation, illustrate with what ease and celerity and certainty a free people may redress their wrongs and assert their liberties, without violence, or disorder, or the sacrifice of a single private right.

Why, then, wage this war upon the States that have withdrawn from the Union, and seek to drive them back into it by force? What earthly good can flow from it? What innumerable evils will it not produce? Recognize their independence *now* and treaties of friendship and alliance will be made, which in a short time will restore trade and commerce to their old channels; travel and social intercourse will resume their wonted paths; and ere long all marks of the present fearful state of things will have worn away: except that we will have two governments and be two distinct nations, and that the dangerous word, war, of crimination and recrimination, which have marked our national legislatures and public hustings, will have ceased, all things will proceed very much as they did before; and the country, North and South go on prospering and to prosper.

But, if the golden opportunity of peace be now lost, seeds of bitterness and wrath will have been sown that will bear fruit for a century to come. You can hardly suppose that the South can be conquered or held as a province. You cannot, I am persuaded, believe that over one million and a half of men, fighting on their own soil, for their dearest rights of life, liberty and property, can be vanquished permanently by any body of men, however large, that the North could bring against them. This State, one of the smallest of the eleven Confederate States, with a voting population of only sixty-five thousand men, has already sent twenty thousand well drilled soldiers to the Confederate army, and in less than a month could send twenty thousand more if needed. This single county of Warren, in which I live, whose whole voting population is under fourteen hundred, and two-thirds of which voted for co-operation of all the Southern States before secession, has now in the Confederate service one thousand men. I, myself, would, if need be, buckle on my armor and fight to maintain our separate nationality and independence, as freely as I would ask God's blessing upon my daily bread; and would sacrifice property and life before I would consent to go back again into a Union as much abhorred now, as it was once honored and revered.

How then, I ask, can you hope to subjugate a people thus united, thus determined? And if you could subjugate them, they would not stay subjugated. It would take a perpetual standing army, as large as that required to conquer the country, to retain it in vassalage. The idea that any Southern State could be whipped into acknowledging fealty to the broken and contemned Union, into taking its place again in the old confederation, is, to our minds and from our standpoint of view, as utterly absurd as it would have been to have expected Washington, at the very moment that Cornwallis was surrendering to him his sword, to have acknowledged the supremacy of England and yielded the independence of the colonies to her haughty domination. The result of the war must either be the recognition, ultimately, of our independence, or our total annihilation. I do not think there is any other alternative. And if that be so, no man who is not utterly lost to every principle of humanity, will say that the latter alternative should be preferred to the former.

You speak, in the conclusion of your letter, of your "loyalty and love for the good Union, and your determination to save it." You cannot save what no longer exists; but I wonder at the infatuation which can prompt you to call the Government under which you live a

"good Union." It is not possible to conceive of more gross and flagrant violations of your Constitution than your President has committed, and is daily committing. Look at his proclamation, establishing the blockade of the ports of the seceded States, and his sending armed ships to carry it out, in the face of the Constitution, which declares explicitly, that "no preference shall be given by any regulation of commerce or revenue to the ports of one State, over those of another ; nor shall vessels bound to or from one State, be obliged to enter, clear, or pay duties in another." Look at his call for volunteers and their enlistment to serve for three years, without a shadow of law for it, thus usurping a power to call out the militia, expressly and solely confided to Congress. Look at his proclamation declaring his intention, with seventy-five thousand soldiers, to proceed to retake forts and do other hostile acts, notwithstanding the power to declare war is alone conferred on Congress. Look at his terrible declaration that he will hang as pirates all privateersmen of the Confederate States whom he may capture, in open violation of the Constitution which leaves it to Congress to define and punish piracies. Look at his invasion with armed troops into Virginia, sword in hand, in face of the Constitution, which makes it the solemn duty of the United States "to protect each State from invasion." See his self-assumed right, without warrant of law, to suspend the writ of *habeas corpus*, and, by the executive arm of the government, strike down and paralyze the judicial power of the Government. See him, without Constitutional authority and against the very letter of the Constitution, searching and seizing persons, houses, papers and effects, and setting at naught nearly every clause in the Bill of Rights. These are all *his* acts, without warrant or color of law, usurping powers given to Congress alone, which they might or might not have authorized him to exercise, but which, without the express authority of the Congress, he is an usurper and a despot to have attempted. And yet you speak of this as the "good Union," and talk admiringly of "your loyalty," and complacently hug yourself with the delusion that in this dreadful war, which you have inaugurated and are prosecuting with such ruthless vindictiveness, you are performing for us a friendly act and "securing to ourselves a nation and a government under which you can leave your children in safety." In contrast to all this, see the dignity and propriety with which every step of *our* Honored Chief Magistrate is taken. His proclamations are marked by no empty bravadoes, truculence or bluster. They exhibited no disregard of constitution and law. They assume no unauthorized powers. Called to the head of the government, as Washington was, to lead the armies of the Continental Congress, he has acted with a prudence and wisdom that have challenged the admiration of friend and foe. With a Constitution, confessing our dependence upon God ; with a President thoroughly imbued with the spirit and principles of christianity ; with a Congress solicitous to do right, and with a people unanimous to maintain our independence, we have nothing to fear from all the passion and madness the North may fulminate against us. We can truly say with Elisha, "they that be for us, are more than they that be against us."

You are perhaps aware that I regarded secession as an illegal and revolutionary remedy, and therefore opposed to it ; and you may not understand how it is that, after the act of secession and separation has been completed, I, and all of those with whom I agreed in opinion and

acted, now cordially and earnestly unite to uphold our State in its new position, and to maintain and stand by the new Union which it has formed. The explanation is a perfectly simple one. From the State government we derive all of our rights of person and property, and are indebted to it for the protection of life and liberty and all that we possess ; and for the vindication of every wrong committed against us. Every social tie derives its existence and sanction from the State authority. We marry our wives, our children inherit our estates, our servants yield obedience to our commands, we buy and sell, we act in every relation of life as man and as citizen under the laws and by the authority of the State Government. To it we are indebted for every right, and to it we resort to redress every wrong. It is, therefore, entitled to our just support and allegiance. As it shields and protects us, as it gives right and liberty to us, so it is in turn our duty to shield and protect it ; to maintain its rights and liberties. It is not the province of the individual citizen, nor is it either his civil duty or political right, to throw himself against a position which the State authority has taken, merely because he conceives that position injudicious or inexpedient or hazardous ; and especially is this so, when, with all his heart and mind, he commends and justifies the motives which prompted the State to assume that position. The attitude of the State once taken, every dictate of reason and of law, both human and divine, require the good citizen to stand by, and uphold it ; even though in doing so he may come in collision with, and be compelled to cancel, a more distant and less direct allegiance, which, under former political arrangements, he owed to another power. The Constitution of the United States was supreme within its limit, beyond all doubt ; but its practical operation on the individual citizen was remote and limited. Its main scope was directed to Federal, and, as a consequence, to foreign affairs, and it had and could have, therefore, outside of its national aspect, no hold upon the affections or the obedience or the allegiance of the people. With the separation of the State from the Union, fell at once all obligation to the National government. The same sword which cut the State from its connection with the United States, severed the tie which bound each of her citizens to allegiance to the Constitution, no longer the supreme law of the State, and left him the subject alone of State authority and power. The citizen of Mississippi, after the ordinance of secession had proclaimed he independent of the Federal Union, was no more subject to that Union than was John Hancock, after he had affixed his signature to the Declaration of Independence, subject to the crown of England.

While these propositions are indisputably true, as to the civil allegiance due under the law of man to the government which protects his private and personal rights, it is equally true that the same allegiance is due under the direct law and command of God. It would be strange, indeed, if it were otherwise. It would be a curious anomaly, if the civil obligations of the faithful citizen to his government conflicted with his religious obligations. We have here but one government ; but one set of magistrates ; but one code of laws. Our courts sit at stated periods, under the State and Confederate authority, presided over by officials of State and Confederate appointment, and award judgment under laws of State and Confederate enactment affecting the lives, liberty and property of the people, with no one in all the broad land to say to

them, nay. If there could be found in the Scriptures a single declaration which prohibited obedience to such laws or submission to the authority which enacted them, it would be an obvious interpolation upon the divine oracles, and would neither receive nor deserve the respect of intelligent Christians. So far as it prescribes rules for the government of men, the Bible is a code of morals, and not of politics. It lays down the rule for the guidance of the citizen in his conduct as such, but does not undertake to declare the form of government under which we must live, nor to prescribe the manner of its creation. It takes sides neither for nor against States Rights. It neither condemns nor justifies secession. It does not advocate a Monarchical or a Republican or a mixed form of government. It expresses its preference for neither arbitrary nor constitutional rule. It is no essay upon the spirit of laws. But its solemn order to the Christian man is : Obey the powers that be, whatever their name or character. Resist not the government or the law ; for if you do, you resist the ordinance of heaven. Men rule in the place of God, as his agents ; obey, therefore your rulers, and thus you obey God. In other words, to be law-abiding is to be God-fearing ; to obey the law is to obey God. The whole teaching of the Bible on this subject is to be summed up in a single sentence : "Obey the established government and its laws ; and that is precisely what I and all the citizens of the Confederate States are doing ; and in so doing we are obeying the will of God, as did our Fathers when they threw off the government of England and rallied to the banner of Independence. God never meant to declare and never has declared that no change should ever take place in government. He never meant to perpetuate the horrors of a despotism like that of Nero. He has only enjoined obedience to the civil authorities, so long as they remain in authority ; but the very moment the sceptre has departed from their hand and passed into that of another, that moment obedience to the former ceases to be of obligation and is at once transferred to the latter. The United States have not even the semblance of actual authority in Mississippi. It is no longer a "power" here. It has ceased to be a government among us. Obedience to it is an impossibility, and would be a breach of law and so of Christian duty. I will not deny that in civil commotions and in the conflict of authorities, the Christian man might find it difficult to determine to what law his obedience was due. But that can never be the case when the organized government under which he lives, acts and directs. In every case the controlling question is : Is the government an existing, established one ? That answered affirmatively, and the path of duty is plain as a sunbeam.

You ask what you and I can do to check this tide of evil, threatening to engulf us all ? I can do but little. I act with those on the defensive. We seek no aggression. We demand nothing but to be let alone. Acknowledge our independence, and, as President Davis says, "the sword will drop from our grasp." You, and men like you, can do much to accomplish this. Your Congress is about to meet. Will it sanction this war of aggression, this invasion of our soil, this intended subjugation ? Flood it with petitions not to do so. Call upon all who maintain the right of self-government, who hold to popular rights, to set their faces against the attempt to crush them out forever. I invoke all who prefer peace and its attendant blessings to war and its inevitable horrors, to call upon your Congress to acknowledge our independence

and establish treaties of peace and alliance between us. Stir up your people for peace and good will, urge them as they would once more see their own section prosperous, their own cities and marts of trade thriving, their government firm and stable and administered according to the principles of your constitution, to acknowledge our independence, and thus lift from themselves and from us the dark clouds which now threaten the peace and security of us all. Do this, and you will have done much to avert the dreadful evils of war ; and whether you succeed or fail you will at least have "the testimony of a good conscience." You will have taken one step towards leaving a stable government to your children, under which they can live in safety ; you will prepare the way for the unexampled prosperity of both sections, and will have vindicated the principles of liberty and free government, before the civilized world, to all time. Fail in this, and let this unnatural war progress and accumulate the bitterness ever incident to bloodshed and violence, and while you may inflict grievous and wide gaping wounds upon us, and throw back our prosperity, and impoverish many of our people, and bring distress and anguish upon many of our households, you will not have subjugated or conquered us, but will have inflicted death stabs upon your own prosperity, have crushed out constitutional liberty in your midst, and erected a military despotism upon the ruins of the Republic which you now possess, and, but for the evil principles and passions you have evoked among yourselves, might have made perpetual.

That you, and men who think with you, may be incited to an earnest effort, in the only path of wisdom, to procure peace by the recognition of our separate nationality, and may succeed in it, is, and shall be, the prayer of,

Yours, &c.,

WM. C. SMEDES.

